The Spirit of Democracy: How to Make Democracies Work

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Article at a glance

• Despite the recent democratic recession, democracy remains a universal value that inspires people around the world.

• Large authoritarian countries are unlikely to turn into full-fledged democracies in the near future.

• Global democratic renewal must come from deepening reforms in young, fragile democracies.

• In order to become liberal democracies, countries must move beyond just holding elections and implement institutional reforms.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades the world has been transformed. In 1974, nearly three-quarters of all countries were dictatorships; today, more than half are democracies. But the 1999 coup in Pakistan was the harbinger of something different. It took place when the third wave of democratization was seemingly at its peak. And it reflected deep-seated problems of governance with which many other new and fragile democracies were also struggling. Since then, “democratic recession” has affected many crucial parts of the world, including Russia, Venezuela, or Nigeria.

Despite these setbacks, the desire for democracy runs deep around the world. There are no global rivals to democracy as a broad model of government. Communism is dead. Military rule lacks appeal everywhere, and is tolerated only as a temporary expedient to restoring order or purging corrupt rulers. One-party states have largely disappeared. Only the vague model of an Islamic state has any moral and ideological appeal – and only for a small portion of the world’s societies. The single example of an Islamic state is the increasingly corrupt, discredited, and illegitimate “Islamic Republic” in Iran, whose own people overwhelmingly desire to see it replaced by a truly democratic form of government.

But how and why exactly does democracy progress? Is it really possible to build free and democratic societies throughout the world? Doing so must involve more than the creation of new political structures; it requires the generation of new norms, as Gandhi put it, “change of the heart.” Democratic structures will be mere facades unless people come to value the essential principles of democracy.

The fate of democracy is not simply driven by abstract historical and structural forces. It is a consequence of struggle, strategy, ingenuity, vision, courage, conviction, compromise, and choices by human actors. In order to spur a renewed democratic boom, new emphasis must be placed on good governance, the rule of law, security, protection of individual rights, vibrant civil society, and shared economic prosperity. Only then will the spirit of democracy be secured.

Democracy’s Waves and Ebbs

In the mid-1970s, you had to be a crank or a romantic to believe that the bulk of the world’s countries would become democratic over the next quarter century. That pessimism was driven in part by the preeminence of modernization theory, which found a powerful correlation between democracy and the level of economic development. Most of the world’s democracies at the time were the advanced industrial countries of the West. And yet, of the 110 non-democratic states in 1974, 63 subsequently made a transition to democracy. The democratic wave grew into a global phenomenon. Today, not only the rich Western countries are democracies, but so are 90 percent of Latin American and Caribbean states, almost two-thirds of the former communist countries, and two-fifths or more of Asia and Africa. How did a world that seemed so naturally and even ineluctably authoritarian in 1975 become predominantly democratic?

When the Movement of the Armed Forces overthrew the nearly fifty-year-old dictatorship in Portugal on April 25, 1974, there was no reason for anyone to expect that it would mean very much for the future of democracy. But democracy would boom during the quarter century after the Portuguese revolution. That boom – what Samuel P. Huntington calls the third wave of global democratic expansion1 – expressed the spirit of democracy. During the 1980s and 1990s, democracy became a zeitgeist, literally “the spirit of the time.”

More recently, however, democratic progress around the world has stalled.

Although the democratic boom has given way to recession, there remains considerable underlying momentum and potential for democratic progress in the world. Increasingly, democratic values and aspirations are becoming universal. If we look at the causes of democratic expansion in the world, we see that the factors that gave rise to the democratic boom are still very much alive. The central challenges are whether the new democracies can deliver what their peoples expect in terms of development and decent, lawful governance, and whether the rich, established democracies can summon the will and wisdom
to refashion and sustain their efforts to promote democracy.

The Challenge of Making Democracies Work

The third wave has brought about a sense of euphoria about global democratic gains and prospects. If democracy had spread so far so fast, why could it not spread everywhere? The recent democratic recession cooled that optimism, but in principle has not denied the open-ended possibilities of democracy – including the possibility that the whole world can become democratic. However, it is not enough for the whole world to become democratic. The more consequential questions are, can those countries that become democracies remain democracies, and can they achieve a level of democracy that their people judge as worth having?

Many new democracies around the world are performing very poorly and are in fact quite “illiberal,” if they can be called democracies at all. Yes, they had competitive elections, even real uncertainty about which party would win power, and even alternation in power, but for much of the population, democracy is a shallow or even invisible phenomenon. What many (or most) citizens actually experience is a mix of distressed governance: abusive police forces, domineering local oligarchies, incompetent and indifferent state bureaucracies, corrupt and inaccessible judiciaries, and venal, ruling elites contemptuous of the rule of law and accountable to no one but themselves.2

As a result, people – especially in the bottom strata of society, which in many new democracies comprise the majority – are citizens only in name. There are few meaningful channels of participation and voice open to them. There are elections, but they are contests between corrupt, clientelistic parties that serve popular interests only in name. There are parliaments and local governments, but they do not represent or respond to broad constituents. There is a constitution, but not constitutionalism – a commitment to the principles and restraints in that hallowed charter. There is democracy in a formal sense, but people are still not politically free. As a result, there is widespread public skepticism, even cynicism and disillusionment, toward “democracy.”

How, then, can young democracies move beyond fleeting hope toward making their political systems more mature, durable, and effective? It is useful at this point to consider a bit more closely what is necessary for a country to be termed a democracy. To many who live or believe they live in a democracy, the term is so intuitive it seems straightforward. But a more careful analysis reveals that democracy varies in depth and may exist above two distinct thresholds: “thin” electoral and “thick” liberal democracy.

Electoral Democracy vs. Liberal Democracy

At the minimal level, if a people can choose and replace their leaders in regular, free, and fair elections, there is an electoral democracy. Calling a political system a democracy doesn’t mean it is a good or admirable system, or that we needn’t worry much about improving it further. It simply means that if a majority of the people want a change in leaders and policies and are able to organize effectively within the rules, they can get change. But electoral democracies vary enormously in their quality. Competitive and uncertain elections, even frequent alternation of parties in power, can coexist with serious abuses of human rights, significant constraints on freedom in many areas of life, discrimination against minorities, a weak rule of law, a compromised or ineffectual judiciary, rampant corruption, gerrymandered electoral districts, unresponsive government, state domination of the mass media, and widespread crime and violence.

Genuine competition to determine who rules does not ensure high levels of freedom, equality, transparency, social justice, or other liberal values. Electoral democracy helps to make these other values more achievable, but it does not by any means ensure them. When we speak of democracy, then, we should aspire to its realization at a higher plane, to the achievement of the ten “thick” dimensions (see box on next page). When these exist in substantial measure, we can call a system a liberal democracy.3 To the extent that these are greatly diminished, democracy – if it exists
If this distinction seems neat and manageable, it is not. First, if elections are to be considered democratic, they must be meaningful in the sense of bestowing real power to govern on those who are elected. Even if elections were free and fair today in Iran (which they are not), the country could hardly be considered a democracy when the ultimate power to decide rests with a religious “supreme leader” who is not accountable to the people. The same could be said for Morocco or Jordan, where the ultimate power remains with the monarchy, or countries where the ultimate power rests with the military, despite elections. All these systems are pseudodemocracies, or electoral authoritarian regimes.

The standard of “free and fair” is in fact a fairly demanding one. Elections are “free” when the legal barriers to entry into the political arena are low, when competing candidates, parties, and their supporters are free to campaign, and when people can vote for whom they want without fear and intimidation. As Miriam Kornblith, a former independent member of Venezuela’s National Electoral Council who watched the country’s president gradually subvert democracy after his election, warns, “Elections can serve to express the collective will and consolidate democracy only when the voting and all that surrounds it are free and fair. Elections that deviate significantly from such standards can serve different ends — including the consolidation of an autocracy that disdains the very democratic mechanisms it loosely and instrumentally follows.”

Is Democracy a Luxury?

Forty years ago, Seymour Martin Lipset argued that the richer the country, the greater the chance that it would sustain democracy. Since then, Lipset’s argument has become conventional wisdom, and researchers have sought to solidify the argument in statistics. In one innovative and rigorous study, Adam Przeworski and his colleagues found that there was in fact a striking relationship between development level and the probability of sustaining democracy between 1950 and 1990.
With every step up in a country’s level of economic development, the life expectancy of a democratic regime increases. In upper-middle-income countries, democracy never breaks down, whereas in the very poorest countries, democracy has a 12 percent chance of dying in any particular year, with an average life expectancy of eight years.7

Yet, since 1990, several democracies in the lowest income category have outlived that expected life span, including Benin, Mali, and Malawi.8 Among the bottom third of countries in terms of human development, democracy has been in place for over four decades in Botswana, for over half a century in India (with only a brief interruption), and for almost two decades in Namibia. Over the past three decades, an unprecedented number of very poor countries have embraced democratic forms of government. Of the thirty-six countries that the United Nations Development Program ranks at the bottom, with “low human development,” about a third of these (thirteen) are democracies. If democracy is the distinctive cultural attribute of the rich, mainly Western countries, why has it spread so far to the poor and the non-Western states?

Of course, it is possible to dismiss this as a fad, a product of superficial diffusion, or a temporary concession to international pressure. From this perspective, democracy can spread anywhere, but it cannot take root and be sustained anywhere. To be sure, democracy is weak and is in serious difficulty in many poor and even some middle-income countries. But in most of these countries, the problems of democracy have more to do with the shortcomings and betrayals of elites than the apathy or authoritarian sentiments of the population. If democracy can emerge and persist for more than fifteen years in a destitute, landlocked, overwhelmingly Muslim country like Mali – in which the vast majority of adults are illiterate and life expectancy is 48 years – then there would seem to be no intrinsic reason why democracy cannot develop in every poor country, and indeed every country.

In fact, a strong case has been made that democracy is not an extravagance for the poor but a necessity. Amartya Sen won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1998 in part for showing that democracies do not have famines. This is because the relatively free flows of information in a democracy raise the flag on food (and other) emergencies, while the mechanisms of political accountability give politicians a powerful incentive to be responsive. Sen argues that “people in economic need also need a political voice.” Thus, “democracy is not a luxury that can await the arrival of general prosperity [and] there is very little evidence that poor people, given the choice, prefer to reject democracy.”9

By this measure, there is a growing evidence of all kinds that democracy is becoming a truly universal value.

**Democracy and Development**

Economic development transforms a society in several ways that make it more difficult to sustain the concentration of power in one man, one party, or a narrow elite. First, it alters a country’s social and economic structure, widely dispersing power and resources. Second, it profoundly shifts attitudes and values in a democratic direction. On the structural side, economic development enlarges the middle class and raises levels of education and information among the general public. As countries develop, incomes become more equally distributed, which diminishes the threat of excessive taxation and intense class conflict and enables the wealthy to tolerate the uncertainties of dispensing with authoritarian rule – and the less well off to be patient for change. Hence, greater equality increases the chances both for a transition to democracy and for its survival.10

Often, economic development also realigns interest coalitions, as shrewder or more visionary elites realize that the withering of extremist threats renders a dictator obsolete; that uneven development under authoritarian rule must be mitigated to preserve the state’s stability; or that newly assertive social groups must be incorporated into the political system. And the newly emerging middle class embraces so-called *psychic mobility.*11 As people leave the countryside for the cities, cutting their ties to traditional oligarchs, bosses, or *caciques*, they also adopt new political attitudes and beliefs, transformed by rising education levels and expanding, and increasingly global, communication. With development, the quantity and
variety of information available explodes, and more important, control over it is dispersed.

With these sweeping social and psychological changes, people in growing numbers form and join organizations — including professional and student associations, trade unions, human rights and civic groups — to service their interests and needs. As these independent organizations grow in number, resources, and sophistication, they become more assertive and more capable of checking and challenging the state, generating the foundations for a vibrant civil society. So as a country gets richer, the balance of power shifts from the state to the society.

The most recent, comprehensive, and ambitious analysis of the relationship between development, value change, and democracy comes from Ronald Inglehart, the founder of the World Values Survey. He and a fellow political scientist Christian Welzel conclude that, “socioeconomic development tends to propel societies in a common direction” — toward self-expression values and “emancipation from authority” — “regardless of their cultural heritage.” This shift toward tolerance, trust in others, suspicion of authority, and valuing of freedom has profound political consequences. For one, it generates higher levels of peaceful protest activities (such as petitions, demonstrations, and consumer boycotts) that challenge ruling elites. And as people come to embrace self-expression values, they come to demand democracy — and not just any democracy but the institutions to protect individual freedom and choice that encompass liberal democracy.

What Sustains Democracy?

Democracy is not sustained by cultural and social factors alone. There is a growing amount of evidence to suggest that people are more likely to express support for democracy when they see it working to provide genuine political competition, including alteration in power, and when it has at least some effect in controlling corruption, limiting abuse of power, and ensuring a rule of law.

Few features of political life are more corrosive of public trust in government and support for democracy than corruption (and other forms of abuse of power). When politicians become a class unto themselves, feeding shamelessly and lawlessly at the public trough, they generate an open invitation for citizens to reject democracy. A spirited civil society plays a vital role in checking and limiting the potential abuse of state power, but it also sustains and enriches democracy. Civil society organizations provide channels, beyond political parties and election campaigns, for citizens to participate in politics and governance, to air their grievances, and to secure their interests.

Sustaining and consolidating democracy therefore entails making it more accountable to the people. Stable democracy requires a rule of law, in which the constitution is supreme, all citizens are equal before the law, no one is above the law, corruption is punished, state authorities respect the rights of citizens, and citizens have effective access to the courts to defend their rights. A democratic rule of law requires a judiciary that is, at every level, neutral, independent from political influence, and reasonably competent and resourceful. An independent judiciary, however, is only one type of democratic institution to constrain the abuse of power. A good democracy requires a dense web of institutions that check and balance the executive (and one another).

Sustaining Democracy in a Developing Country

As discussed earlier, the persistence of democracy in developed countries presents no real mystery: economic development naturally brings about transformations in individual values and social structure that press societies toward democracy and make it difficult to sustain non-democratic government. This is not an invitation to apathy. There is a natural human tendency to want to corner power and monopolize resources, and thus democracy remains continually vulnerable. For rich countries, the success of reform determines the quality and scope of democracy. For poor countries, the survival of democracy is at stake.

At the most general level, two things sustain democracy: the decent functioning and gradual deepening of democracy and a rising hope for a better
life. India is a telling example. Over time, Indian democracy has worked substantially to provide electoral choice, rotation of power, checks on ruling elites, exposure of abuse of power, and legal and political redress of grievances. The gains have been uneven, but aggrieved groups have seen that the constitutional system can be made to work for them – and for everyone. Citizens have come to know that democracy means more than occasional elections, that it provides an ongoing means for achieving accountability and responsiveness, and for making the political leadership more broadly representative.

At the same time, democracy in India has worked in another political sense, with huge implications for other divided societies. Democracy has provided peaceful means to manage and accommodate deep differences. Again, these have not progressed without serious setbacks, but constitutional and legal instruments have prevented or contained large-scale violent conflict while deepening groups’ stakes in the democratic system. India’s federal structure, its electoral and party systems, and its rules for empowerment of minorities have worked because they fit the country’s particular circumstances and because they have been able to adapt to changing circumstances over time.

Finally, Indian democracy has been powerfully sustained by the steady expansion of the public’s hope in it. Until the last decade or so, India’s economic development was unnecessarily retarded by a long-lingering ideological devotion to socialist principles of state intervention and economic autarky.

Since the liberalization and opening of the Indian economy began in 1991, economic growth rates have risen well beyond the tortoise-like “Hindu rate of growth” of the country’s first four decades, and transformation is finally under way. And if the earlier rate of growth did not lift nearly enough people out of poverty, it did at least make gradual progress in improving people’s lives.

With a better understanding of the kinds of economic policies that promote development and of the technical means to fight disease, increase crop yields, and improve human capacity, most developing countries today have the potential to grow faster than India did during its first four decades. But the lesson of India’s remarkable experience is that even modest but consistent economic development, combined with a decent functioning and gradual deepening of democratic institutions, can sustain a free political system just about anywhere.

**New Democracies at Risk**

If many new and unstable democracies do not last, the challenge before us will not be extending the democratic tide but instead managing the implosion of democracy, what Samuel Huntington would call the *third reverse wave*. Therefore, the near-term fate of democracy will mainly be determined in countries that have only become democratic in the last decade or two.

To remain a global value and destination, democracy must be seen to be a viable model. It is still the case that the most powerful demonstration effects are regional ones. Is it plausible to imagine that China will democratize if democracy in Taiwan sinks deeper into political polarization and a crisis over national identity? Or to imagine that Vietnam (and eventually Laos, Cambodia, and Burma) will move toward democracy if it rots in Indonesia? What prospect does democracy have in the former Soviet world if it does not strengthen in Central and Eastern Europe? How will the blatantly authoritarian half of Africa democratize if the continent’s emerging democracies, beginning with South Africa, cannot make democracy work?

To be sure, the gains for freedom in the world have been real and diffuse. But the celebration of democracy’s triumph has been premature. Outside of the long-industrialized democracies, only a few countries have achieved a stable and liberal democracy of reasonably high quality. And even in many of these countries that we take for granted as democratic success stories there are real problems of governance and deep pockets of disaffection.
The Path to Democratic Renewal

The triumph of democracy and the march to prosperity are largely a story of taming abuse of power, opening up access to political and economic markets, and binding the naturally predatory tendencies of rulers to impersonal, impartial rules and institutions. Several innovations are necessary in order to move a society from a state of predation and closure to one of openness and democracy.

First, horizontal relations of trust and cooperation must be constructed, ideally across ethnic and regional divides, to challenge elitist hierarchies and personal rule. This requires building a dense, vigorous civil society, with independent organizations, mass media, think tanks, and other networks that will generate social capital, foster civic norms, press public interests, raise citizen consciousness, break the bonds of clientelism, scrutinize government conduct, and lobby for good governance reforms.

Next, effective institutions of governance must be constructed to constrain the discretion of rulers, to open their decisions and transactions to inspection, and to hold them accountable before the law. This means building institutions of vertical and horizontal accountability. The premier institution of vertical accountability is a genuinely democratic election. Others include public hearings, citizen audits, and a freedom of information act. In complement, horizontal accountability invests some agencies of the state with the power and responsibility to monitor the conduct of other agencies, officials, or branches of government. These include judiciaries, parliamentary committees, public audits, ombudsmen, electoral commissions, and counter-corruption bodies.

Third, poorly performing democracies need better, stronger, and more democratic institutions linking citizens not just to one another but also to the political process. Primarily, this means political parties, parliaments, and local governments. Of course, in all democracies, by definition, these institutions exist in a formal sense. But in shallow democracies, political participation does not really amount to much except occasional voting because politics is so elite-dominated, corrupt, and unresponsive. In such circumstances, the people are largely excluded from effective participation and representation of their interests, and power and resources are narrowly held. Here reform requires internal democratization of political parties by improving their transparency and accessibility and making other representative bodies more inclusive and effective.

Finally, reforms must extend into the economic sphere, foremost with reforms generating a more open market economy in which it is possible to accumulate wealth through honest effort and initiative in the private sector, with the state playing a limited role. “Legal and regulatory reforms that reduce administrative barriers to doing business serve to minimize incentives for corruption,” while corporate governance programs to “inculcate values of [business] responsibility, transparency and accountability” can address the “supply side” of the corruption problem.15 Strong guarantees of property rights, including the ability of small holders and informal sector workers to get title to their land and business property, set a broader institutional landscape that limits government corruption. All of these challenges must be met to some degree if a democracy is to work well – or work at all.

Conclusion

There is a good reason to question whether a shallow rendition of democracy can legitimately be termed anything more than a competitive authoritarian regime. But whether a regime is competitive authoritarian or merely a badly governed, low-quality democracy, the challenge remains: For democratic structures to endure – and to be worthy of endurance – they must be more than a shell. They must have substance, quality, and meaning. They must, over time, hear people’s voices, engage their participation, tolerate their protests, protect their freedoms, and respond to their needs.

In the coming decade, the fate of democracy will not be determined by the scope of its expansion to the remaining dictatorships of the world. Too many of these regimes have learned practical if ugly lessons on how to frustrate democratic change and the odds of a
great many of them becoming electoral democracies (not to mention liberal democracies) before 2015 are unfortunately small. Some of these regimes might collapse because of a sudden crisis or a split within the ruling ranks, but in the near term this might usher in a new brand of authoritarian rule rather than democracy.

Beyond the next decade, the prospects for renewed global expansion of democracy will depend primarily on three factors. One will be gradual economic development that lifts levels of education, information, and autonomous citizen power and organization. The second will be the gradual integration of countries into a global economy, society, and political order in which democracy remains the dominant value and the most attractive type of political system. As for the third factor that will determine whether democracy booms again as it did in the 1980s and 1990s: before democracy can spread farther, it must take deeper root where it has already sprouted.

The new democracies that have come into being since 1974 must demonstrate that they can solve governance problems and meet citizens’ expectations for freedom, justice, a better life, and a fairer society. If democracies do not work better to contain crime and corruption, generate economic growth, relieve economic inequality, and secure justice and freedoms, sooner or later, people will lose faith and embrace (or tolerate) non-democratic alternatives. The new democracies must be consolidated, so that all levels of society become committed lastingly and unconditionally to democracy as the best form of government and to democratic norms of tolerance and restraint. In other words, for democracies to endure, their leaders and citizens must internalize the spirit of democracy.

Endnotes

3 Ibid., pp. 10-13. When a democracy meets all the institutional attributes of liberal democracy, it also satisfies “thick” conceptions of what a democracy should be.
4 Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, pp. 15-16. There are many other pseudonyms for this species of regime, including virtual democracies, electoral authoritarian and competitive authoritarian regimes.
8 Their poorest category was under $1,000 in 1985 purchasing power parity dollars, which is equivalent to $1,449 in year 2000 dollars.
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